

Study shows farmers make room for wildlife, habitat on their land

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Courier/Medill News Service

WASHINGTON — There's room on the farm for one more raccoon, pheasant, or family of foxes, according to a nationwide study of farmers, which found that 51 percent of agricultural producers promote wildlife habitats on their property.

The study, released this week by Utah State University researcher Michael Conover and funded by the American Farm Bureau Federation, was based on two nationwide surveys of more than 7,300 agricultural producers. Of the 1,052 farmers surveyed in the Great Plains states, 60 percent said they promote wildlife.

Fifty percent of all the farmers surveyed said they have left crop residues in their fields to accommodate visiting wildlife. And 39 percent said they provided valuable cover for wildlife near their fields, 41 percent said they provided water, and 15 percent said they left part of their crops unharvested to feed any unexpected visitors.

"Farmers, like all people, love seeing animals and sharing their farms with wildlife," said Conover. "They like seeing deer in the morning, but at times it (wildlife) becomes a lia-

bility."

Not all creatures of the wild are gracious guests. The damage they cause costs American agriculture more than \$4 billion and 86 million hours of labor annually, according to the study. Every year, each farmer loses an average of \$423 and 42 hours of labor to wildlife, and 32 percent of all farmers and ranchers said their losses from wildlife damage last year exceeded \$1,000.

Deer were mentioned most often by respondents (58 percent) as the species causing the most damage to agricultural production, followed by coyotes (28 percent), raccoons (27 percent), woodchucks (24 percent), blackbirds and beavers (at 22 percent each).

In Black Hawk County, the two most prevalent wild animals are the deer and the pheasant, said district conservationist Mike Webster.

Some area farmers put up wind breaks, plant trees and establish unharvested food plots to protect and feed animals and birds, he said.

But not enough farmers use these techniques, said Waterloo farmer Rod Platte, whose 1,000-acre farm is regularly visited by white-tail deer, pheasants, Hungarian partridges and,

recently, a few wild turkeys.

"My kids don't have to go to a park, they can see wildlife right out here," Platte said.

The study also found that 40 percent of the respondents opposed the creation of a wildlife sanctuary near their land, because the damage on their property was so severe. In addition, 26 percent said damage levels reduced their willingness to provide habitat on their property.

Ironically, some farmers are willing to spend time, effort and money to actually encourage wildlife to flourish on their land, spending an average of 12 hours and \$150 in 1993, according to the study.

Platte, for example, has set aside a 5-acre grazing patch for these animals, built a pond and planted 3,500 green ash and maple trees, creating a protective timber lot for wildlife.

There is not much habitat left in the area, Platte said, and "about one out of ten farmers here may do something about it."

Creating wildlife habitats will always be a "volunteer-type thing and nothing people can be enticed to do," Platte said, "but if everybody just did (set aside) an acre — that's all it would take."